

Voices of Women: Telling the Truth Through Art Making

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*“We must begin to tell the truth, in groups, to one another.”
(Carolyn Heilbrun, 1988)*

Joining the Circle

On Wednesdays, when the last period of the school day is finished, the students trickle out of room 412 of Burnham High School¹ and the young women enter who have been waiting outside. They immediately push all the desks to the side or back walls, leaving a large open space. Then each carries a chair toward the front of the room, creating a circle. Someone closes the door, and they begin to talk with one another. Thus begins a weekly meeting of Voices of Women (VOW), a group comprised mainly of high school girls who create collaborative artwork based on their personal experiences and concerns with how society treats young women.

Voices of Women (VOW) was a high school based young women's art group² founded by Karen, an English teacher who was concerned with the treatment of female students at her school, as they made up only 24% of the student population. When a girl in one of her classes was physically attacked within the school, Karen invited female students to start a discussion group. In this way she hoped to provide

a safe place to discuss issues salient to their lives, as well as to create a supportive community for female students.

After two years, VOW decided to make art to voice to others the concerns and ideas that they discussed. Their first collaborative work, *Listen* (Figure 1), was a wall installation dealing with their experiences with and responses to sexual harassment. The 3' by 5' piece incorporates their own hands cast in plaster, reaching out to beckon or grab at the viewer. The background is covered with text: catcalls, descriptions of being looked at and touched, and ruminations on wanting to be heard. The viewer is forced to realize that the "hostile hallways" (AAUW, 1993) many young women experience are not only in schools, but also in the streets, buses, stores, and the media. As the artwork highlighted a harassment problem in the school, their principal was reluctant to exhibit it in the school's gallery. It was finally exhibited when the group asked for and received permission from an administrative superior.

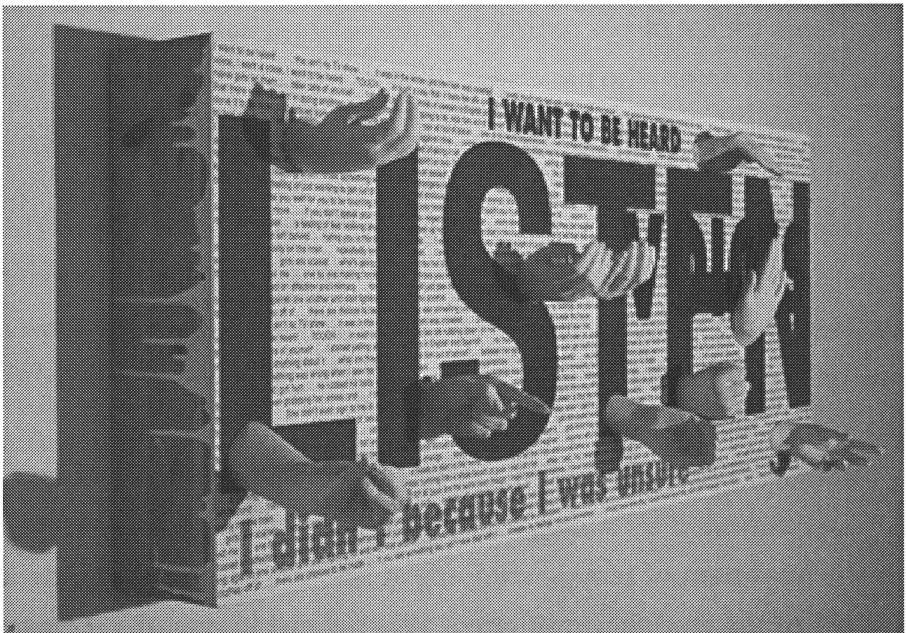


Figure 1 *Listen*

My connection to VOW began when I learned about the *Listen* piece. As an artist and art educator, I have been interested in ways to encourage young people to use art as a means to engage with social issues they find important. I have also been interested in ways adolescents make art without adult initiations. I wanted to understand the process VOW used to create their work, and so Karen invited me to a meeting. After describing my background to the group, I asked to be able to study VOW's process, explaining what I thought that would entail. The members made it clear that in order to do this I would need to become one of them. I could not be outside the circle as only an observer; I needed to participate. In order to know them, they needed to know me. This was how I became a member of VOW. Through observations, interviews, and participating as a member, I became friends with the young women of VOW and documented how, when given the space, time and mentoring, these adolescent girls, through discussion and art making, grappled with personal and social dilemmas.

My joining VOW coincided with the group's involvement with an art education program for secondary school students at a major local museum³. For approximately four months VOW worked to create an installation based on their response to Fred Tomaselli's *Gravity's Rainbow (Large)*, an art piece we viewed at a satellite gallery of the museum. The work VOW created came to be known as *Fathers* (Figure 2, next page), a deceptively cheerful looking floor installation, which tells the hidden stories involving members' fathers and father figures (Figure 3, detail, next page).



Figure 2 *Fathers*

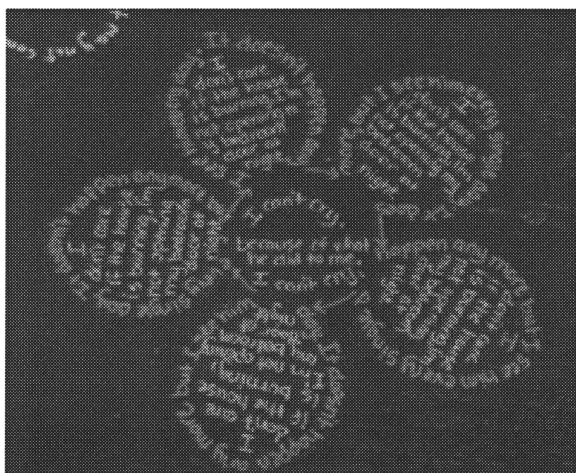


Figure 3 *Fathers, detail*

I immediately learned that the core of VOW was the circle, and that the foundation of VOW meetings was listening, telling, and sharing. After creating the circle, everybody would sit down and the meeting would begin. If someone entered later, the circle was enlarged; nobody

sat outside the circle. If someone left, her chair was removed and the circle was closed. Then, what we called the Go-Around would begin. Sometimes Karen would start, sometimes another member, but, going around the circle, each member would relate what she wished, usually beginning with the previous week's experiences. Members spoke only when they wanted to. There was no pushing to do so, though everybody usually participated. As Shari explained, "In the circle, we listen and condone."

There was a feeling of closeness, care and, more noticeably, relief during the Go-Around. Veronica, a rather quiet member at the start, described her enthusiasm for the group, "All you've got to say is, 'No, but...', and they say, 'Wait, listen to what she has to say. What do you have to say, Veronica? They listen and include.'" The experience was reminiscent of Annie Rogers' (1993) description of her "voice-centered" work with young girls when she observed that, "We speak around the circle, each intent, without evaluations" (p. 282). We talked about experiences that angered us, scared us, and excited us. Just as Brown (1991) found in her work with young girls, listening and acknowledging was essential to our discussions, as it provided, "not simply an audience, but a relationship in which [to be] taken seriously (p. 84). This was a place where we could feel comfortable talking, and where we could be honest. This was also where art was made.

A Path of Memories

"You can't expect to live a life of flowers.

You can't expect to always walk on petals." (Veronica)

In my second week as a VOW member, we visited the art gallery and discussed Tomaselli's art piece. *Gravity's Rainbow (Large)* is a wall-size piece that appears from several feet away to be comprised of colorful beads decoratively hung in necklace-like strands, all imbedded

in a glossy resin over a solid black background. The necklaces actually consist of medicine pills, magazine cutouts of body parts and animals, and marijuana leaves. The artwork is pleasing to look at, meticulously put together, and its composition is gorgeous.

The discussion of the work did not delve into Tomaselli's use of such provocative materials. VOW members focused on the immense size of the work (8' X 20') and how its decorative appearance took on new meaning when viewed from up close. VOW wanted to somehow incorporate this duality of meaning with Sheila's idea that we make an art piece on the floor. Maya further suggested that the piece be in the form of a path and include self-portraiture. The group agreed that a floor installation would be an interesting and new idea.

After several brainstorming meetings in the weeks that followed, we combined and transformed many ideas. We decided to create a room-size installation. The work would take the form of an oval path that incorporated written stories of member's lives. Karen described the idea as representing life as a circular path, explaining, "It's a loop, not a linear thing, like going around and around. It's not fixed- girls/ women, women/ girls." She also was making a connection to both the lack of hierarchy in the group, and how our meetings transpired.

Several members suggested printing ghostlike body impressions onto the path's surface as a way to represent how memories, as Lucinda explained, are "always there but also not there." Borrowing from the Tomaselli piece, the background would be solid black. Contrasting with this ground, the stories would be in bright, happy colors. The body prints would be in a dark gray, inhabiting the liminal space between the black/blank ground and the brightly colored stories coming to the surface.

Near the end of the meeting, Lucinda suggested that if we wrote the stories in decorative shapes, then from far away, like *Gravity's Rainbow (Large)*, the piece would have a deceptively decorative

appearance, but up close, could have another meaning altogether. The group became excited:

From far away it'll be colorful and pretty, but up close, it'll be real. It'll tell the truth. (Jessica)

It can be all flowery and decorative far away, but we can tell them what really goes on when they read it. (Lucinda)

So the bright colors are gonna get them to read it, and then they'll discover something else. (Natalia)

The emphasis on VOW's art as being a means of telling the truth was beginning to surface. It was a theme continuously discussed in meetings and became more prominent as we created our piece. The stories were to be our own, not second hand, and not symbolically represented.

As the meeting ended, Lucinda turned to the group and asked, "you know, since we want our own words, why don't we use what we say at these meetings?" Veronica pointed out that I would be a good source, since I always took notes. I told the group that I would provide quotes and information that I recorded at meetings.

Under the Decorative Surface

As the piece took shape, we continued our weekly talks about our lives. During one meeting, Veronica, explained how much being a member of VOW meant to her, "When I'm here I feel like I have a family. I'm not alone when I'm here." After Veronica's comment, the tone of the meeting changed. With her emphasis on the very personal and emotional, Veronica seemed to give others an opening to discuss what they had been avoiding, parts of themselves they had been hiding.

There was a silence, and then Maya declared with an angry tone, "I haven't told the police because it's for them [her brothers]. They don't know what that jackass did to me."

Maya's comment was startling as it suddenly switched the conversation to abuse. She had previously talked with VOW about being sexually abused, but not recently. The rest of the meeting was about abuse, almost all dealing with sexual abuse. The stories came tumbling out:

It doesn't happen any more, but I see him every single day. I'm afraid my brother might take on some of these things because he saw some of the things that happened. I don't care if the house is burning down; I'm not opening my bedroom door at night. (Marika)

I didn't want to tell my story, I didn't want to stand as a victim, but now I know that telling my story makes me stronger. (Barbara)

If it happens to you, you think O.K., I'm too scared. But when it happens to someone else, like your little sister – no, they can't do that. You jump in. You talk. (Cynthia)

This meeting was a turning point for the group. There was a great deal of anger, crying, and comforting. This was the real beginning of telling the truth. Members began to realize what telling true stories would entail. Natalia, sitting next to me, commented several times that these stories should be included, that they were the real stories underneath the decorative surface.

The stories members told of abuse were tragic. How does a little girl deal with being raped by her father, stepfather, grandfather? What does she do when her mother does not believe her? What does she do

when she lives in a society that says it is O.K. for boys to be sexually active, but a girl who is a slut, is cheap, is a 'ho'? If she has already been raped by age ten, does that make her a slut? Where does she go from there if she enters middle school not a virgin because someone in her house has decided to use her body as he wishes? One out of five in the group talked about being sexually abused. A person can take in the statistics mentioned in the media, but it is a different story when meeting the numbers. Natalia whispered to me what I was thinking, "The statistics that I see on the news are the people sitting next to me." All the abusers had been family members. The danger is often perceived as being out in the world, but for these young women, it was at home.

In response to this meeting, the next week Barbara presented her artwork, which incorporated photographs, collage, and mixed media. She described her work as "appropriating family pictures to make them more real." She had been sexually abused at five, and so the photographs of her at that time needed to be transformed to create the world of what she called the "five-year-old woman," somehow to show the loss of childhood. Barbara described her work as a reclaiming of her story, "I felt someone was telling my story for me, and I wanted to tell my own story. It has been an empowerment for me."

When Barbara told the group that "making art about yourself is a feminist statement," we discussed the idea of bringing the previous weeks' stories into the piece. How could we do this without losing privacy? We decided that we would all, VOW, be the authors of all the stories we incorporated into the artwork. There would be nothing in the stories to identify individual authors. This would enable us to use our stories with less fear. The first person narrator could also, as Veronica said, "represent girls who don't have a way of speaking out."

Before leaving, we agreed that flowers would be used as the shapes for the stories. We would use different sized flower shapes as templates to trace and write the stories within. Flowers, perceived as

colorful, decorative and representing girls in a stereotypical, superficial way, would be the perfect metaphor to contrast with the stories. The flowers would be wonderfully deceiving, as surface appearances so often are. Natalia explained the idea well:

When I think of brightly colored flowers, I think of something cheerful, something nice, but some of the stories that we have are difficult, upsetting, even awful.

During the next discussion, the group decided on the theme of “fathers” as the focus of the stories. Many had noticed that fathers or father figures had often been a main factor in the untold stories of members’ lives. This theme allowed the incorporation of the abuse stories, since all of the incidents of abuse had happened in the home by fathers or father figures. Lisa explained that this focus also would ensure that the work had “a personal voice and a group voice at the same time,” something VOW found important to the success of the group’s work. This topic also connected non-VOW members with an essential component of VOW’s purpose, making art that communicated with others. As Veronica pointed out, “the art isn’t just for us, but to tell others what’s going on.”

The Fathers Project

“This is our opportunity to speak, to tell people what we have to say.” (Karen)

Everything VOW did was somehow connected to dialogue. The group could exist without making art, but it could not exist without the Go-Around. And so, before the stories would be painted on the path, they would be shared with the group.

The meeting when the father stories were told was difficult and emotional. Of the group of 15 that was present, only three had

unambiguously positive stories. The rest dealt with broken relationships, death, abuse, drugs, abandonment, and disappointment. Each member's story was different, and each brought us starkly into her world, often beginning with the problem:

I don't really know him. It's like I see him on the street and he's like an acquaintance. Hi. Hi. How ya doin'? That's it. (Cynthia)

My dad is an alcoholic and has been that way all my life. I don't want the things I see in my father to be in the man that I'm with. (Lucinda)

He's always insulting, yelling, cursing at my mother. He once yelled at me, 'If you don't do well, you're gonna end up like her, a failure working in a factory.' My mom even told me, move, if I get a chance, go. (Anne)

He had visitation rights until one day he decided not to bring me back. They called it kidnapping. (Karen)

It's like a freakin' soap opera when it comes to my family. My mom had four –I've had four stepfathers, all in jail now. Well, lately they're just boyfriends. (Maya)

We discussed the stories, how to tell them, to explain them. When the two positive stories involving intact marriages were discussed, the group became excited. They wanted to hear about these happy moments and acted as if they were listening to bedtime stories ("Come on, tell us! Oh, how romantic!"). It made me realize how unusual it was for many of them to conceive of such a home life:

I still call him Daddy, even at my age, when everyone thinks it's 'uncool' to acknowledge their parents. (Donna)

The first time my father saw my mother, he pointed to her and said, "I'm gonna marry her!" – and he did! (Natalia)

The other positive story was Ayiesha's bittersweet, shadowy memory of receiving a piece of candy from a father who had died long ago. It was the only memory she had of him.

As with the meeting where members discussed incidents of abuse, I did not participate. These were the only two meetings where I remained silent and only took notes. It did not occur to me that it was not simply that I wanted to collect the data, that it was also at this time easier to be a silent researcher. The rest of the group did not mind, as they saw me as a member who was also the "historian" of this project. I would be helping their goal of getting their ideas out.

Barbara, who understood the courage behind making artwork that tells "a story that has not been welcomed into the world" (Rogers, p. 273) encouraged us to reflect by advising, "You need to check in and see what you are willing and ready to say. Check in on what you are ready to say and let out of this room." I did not realize the "transgressive courage" (Rogers, p. 273) involved in discussing and writing these stories until I began my own. Writing my story, designed as alternating petals of positive and negative memories, made me understand some of the girls' comments of feeling exposed or fearing they were betraying their families. Never having done any artwork about my family, I too was apprehensive. Though I wanted to tell my story, I was relieved that it was part of a group piece; it would be among others. Still I could not fathom Maya's courage as she and I discussed her difficulty with writing about a horrific story of rape ("He was an Indian colored man

creeping like the shadows into my room...”) and yet making it visually interesting enough to grab a viewer’s attention to read it. She concluded that she wanted people to know this story; she would present it in any way that encouraged others to read it (Figure 4).

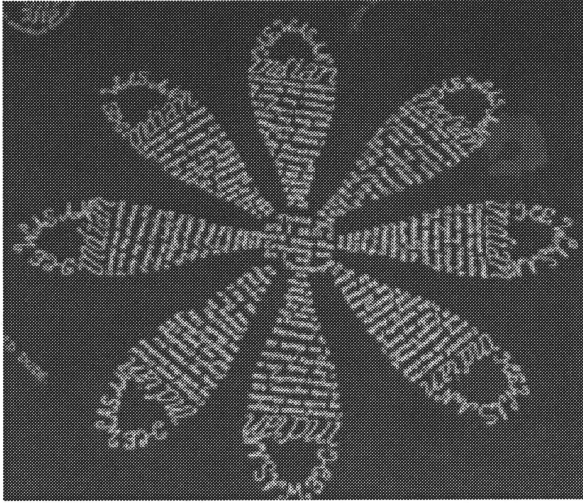


Figure 4 *Maya's story*

Being with these young women began to have an effect on me. They had the courage to not only tell the truth to one another, but also to anyone who viewed their work. Paralleling Rogers’ (1993) experience, working with these young women “br[ought] to the surface my questions about courage, and their ordinary courage soak[ed] into my body, straighten[ing] my spine” (p. 283). I too could learn from this courageous truth telling.

In the end, the group decided to sign the work, but not their individual stories. Two flowers were stenciled and we wrote our signatures in them. In this way members were the authors of each and all the stories. Only Maya decided not to, opting for a pen name. Hers was definitely the most upsetting story to read. It was specifically about being raped, not a response to it, as others were.

As sharing the artwork with others was considered part of the piece, it would not be complete until shown publicly. We were able to exhibit *Fathers* in the satellite gallery's lobby, though it was after Tomaselli's piece had been removed. We installed the work ourselves, deciding on a display that enabled viewers to encircle it. There were well over one hundred people at the opening and the gallery staff appeared surprised at the result of what they perhaps thought would be a simple school art project. VOW members, identified by the flowers we carried, were there to discuss the work with visitors. We were unexpectedly nervous, excited, and proud. As Veronica explained, "I felt included. Everyone knew that I was a part of this great project and I looked around and saw the others holding their flowers and felt a special bond."

Most noticeable to all of us were the responses. Visitors spent a great deal of time crouched down, silently reading and methodically moving through the loop. This was an opening where most of the attention was on the work, not on socializing. As Donna later commented,

One of the most interesting aspects of the night was the feedback. Every woman I spoke with shared an experience of her own with me that was aroused by the piece. Everyone had an experience they could relate to. Everyone had something to say.

Many visitors were surprised at the content of the work. One woman, obviously moved, quietly told me, "I didn't realize it was so serious." Whether she was referring to the piece or to the lives of these young women, I was not sure. Either way, her comment showed that VOW had accomplished one of its goals – to communicate to adults what they experienced.

Telling the Truth

"Speak up, woman!" (Lucinda)

In *Writing a Woman's Life* (1988), Carolyn Heilbrun predicted that female narratives would be found where women shared "the stories of their lives and their hopes and their unacceptable fantasies" (p. 44). This is exactly what VOW did during their weekly meetings, as they discussed and shared personal and shared stories. These discussions, or Go-Arounds, were what connected members to one another, as well as what supplied the material for the artwork.

VOW began as a group of women meeting to talk about their experiences and ideas. What made them change and define themselves as a women's art group was the realization that by making art, they could bring attention to concerns they found important, particularly those concerns that were often ignored or avoided by the adults around them. As Barbara pointed out, "Together the girls have created a safe space for sharing of themselves, and their art functions as their voice. It's their way of communicating with the world." Several members explained how VOW used their artwork to compel those who viewed it to deal with significant issues.

VOW is about art and women. It's more about us taking a stand and helping others, talking about issues that are important to us as a whole, just saying through the work—"This is wrong." (Maya)

The art isn't just art; it's what we feel and what we go through. It's our lives. (Veronica)

We don't give speeches; we give artwork. People tend to listen more to the artwork than to people talking. (Veronica)

Many of the members often talked about their art as being an extension of their voices, with three different purposes in mind. They saw their artwork as a platform to communicate to the world concerns they had about society, as a means to affirm and validate the experiences of other adolescents, and finally as a way to tell the adult world what was really going on. As Shari explained it,

The artwork is important for us to say the things we need to say. It's an outlet. But also, we might be going through the same thing that some other teenager did. So, if they see it, they'll think, 'Oh, I can relate to that!' and they'll feel connected. Maybe it will help them. Also, adults need to see it so they know what's going on. They need to know. They don't do enough so now they can't say they didn't know.

Finally, the members understood the bravery in making their work, as it took courage to tell the stories that others were unable to tell. As Veronica explained,

There could be girls out there that want to say this, but they're so scared. I know I'm always scared to say something if something happens. Girls could be thinking, "Finally there's a group of women ready to say something, to get up and tell others."

Veronica often talked about the bravery involved in speaking out, but that having the group made it easier, "It takes bravery to say some of the things we wanna say. It helps having the group behind you." If they spoke as a group, they could say the things they could not say as individuals. Having worked on the *Fathers Project*, I began to understand their numerous references to bravery and courage. As Natalia put it, "It's hard to *really* tell the truth."

VOW's work could be understood as a form of witnessing in that members were actively attesting to the stories presented. Through the *Fathers* Project, they were not onlookers or silent bystanders, but deliberately saying: This happened to me. This is what it was like. I know. Listen. Through their own stories they were also affirming the stories of others.

"Like Walking on Eggshells"

Telling the truth was an important aspect in VOW's work. Yet, when members were outside the group, they constantly edited themselves. In referring to her pre-VOW times, when she saw girls being harassed by boys in school, Shari explained why she kept quiet:

I never said anything before. The more and more things happened around me, the more I pulled back because I had so much more to say. The more I had to say, the more I pulled back.

Veronica, whom I saw go from a silent to a vocal participant at VOW meetings, explained to me why she still did not speak out, "I don't say things cuz I'm scared. It happens a lot. If something happens, I'm like, no, I don't wanna say anything. I can't."

Members edited what they said in class, in the halls, and at home. They often decided what they would wear by considering what others might think or do. Lisa explained that "wearing a short skirt in this school is almost like a riot. The guys cheer – they try to grab you." There was always the understanding of being observed and judged, and so there was also the idea of wanting to have some power in labeling themselves rather than being labeled. The fear of not being accepted or liked, of even expressing anger, referred to by Brown and Gilligan (1992) as the "tyranny" of the "perfect girl", caused many of the VOW members to censor themselves as a form of protection:

I didn't say anything cuz I didn't want to hurt someone's feelings.
(Sophie)

When I get nasty or complain, they [the boys] stop talking to me,
and I feel bad." (Anne)

I feel like the day I would say straightforward, 'Listen, I don't
like when you touch me like that', that would kind of lead to him
saying, 'Oh, that's a ——. She's this, she's that and, you know,
ruin your whole reputation with everybody else. (Natalia)

Being a girl and going to this school is like walking on eggshells.
From the moment you walk in as a freshman you have to be careful
about what you do, what you say, how you behave. Because there
are so many guys in this school, it's so easy to be labeled a slut.
(Lisa)

The situation within VOW enabled these young women not only
to talk about the times when they silenced themselves, but also gave
them a platform – their artwork – to communicate what they might
otherwise withhold. For VOW members, making art was, in fact, a
powerful form of political activism.

The young women of VOW came to a point where their world
was not providing the narratives to help them deal with their situations.
As Carolyn Heilbrun understood, the narratives they needed were
created when they, "exchange[d] stories, where they read and talk[ed]
collectively of ambitions and possibilities and accomplishments" (p.
46). Through making art together, VOW was able to share and present
those new narratives, "finding a voice to speak what has been
unspeakable" (Rogers, 1993, p. 281). As Natalia explained, "Through
our artwork we have a voice to tell people – This is how it feels."

The young women of VOW found that they did not see themselves reflected in society's narratives, ones that they had been expected to follow. Being a part of VOW helped its members gain the courage to "resist the security of convention and move into uncharted territory" (Brown, 1991, p. 72) to create new narratives from their life experiences and not from the "available fiction of female becoming" (Miller, as quoted in Heilbrun, 1988, p. 18). Through discussions and artwork, VOW began the process of bringing forth female (visual) narratives that young adolescent women have needed in order to find alternatives to the traditional, conventional "assigned script" with which they have been living. With adult females as fellow artists and mentors, the young women of VOW were able to "understand the effects of the culture on their lives" (Pipher, 1995, p. 43), enabling them to reflect on it through discussion and to fight back through their art. In the absence of anything that fit comfortably in their true realities, VOW worked together to tell the truth and "create new stories to live by" (Heilbrun, 1988, p. 37).

The members of VOW found that not only was making art about themselves a feminist statement, but that telling their own stories was empowering. They began to reject the "nice rather than honest" (Pipher, p. 39) perspective because within VOW they could be honest without fear of being rejected. This is not to say that they no longer silenced themselves, but they found that it was possible, through their art, to no longer be voiceless.

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Notes

¹ All identifiers, except for the name of the group, have been changed. Quotes from VOW members were recorded in meetings or interviews while I was a member of the group, as documented in Pennisi (2000).

² At the time of this study, there were as many as 20 VOW members. As the majority of members graduated and moved on, the group dissipated.

³ The program suggests contemporary work in the museum's collection as a catalyst for artmaking and provides an artist/educator to facilitate the process. Barbara, a photographer, worked with the group for six weeks. Unlike the usual teacher-centered design of this program, Barbara adapted to VOW's process of consensus.